International Journal of Asian Social Science Research; Vol.2, No.5; 2025
E-ISSN: 3006-2179 P-ISSN：3006-754X
DOI: https://doi.org/10.70267/ijassr.250205.8293
Published by: Zeus Press

Britain's South China Sea Policy in the Early 1990s: Evidence from Foreign and Commonwealth Office Archives

Qinyu Zhao[1] and Jinyuan Liu[2*]

[1]*PhD Candidate, School of History, Nanjing University, Nanjing, 210000, China*

[2]*Professor, School of History; Collaborative Innovation Center of South China Sea Studies, Nanjing University, Nanjing, 210000, China*

**Corresponding author: Jinyuan Liu.*

Abstract

After the end of the Cold War, the geopolitical landscape of the South China Sea underwent significant changes. During this period, China preferred to resolve the disputes through negotiation and consultation, while Vietnam, the Philippines, and others continued to reinforce their so-called sovereignty claims over the Spratly Islands through various means. The United Kingdom maintained a generally low profile on the issue but showed internal caution toward China's growing influence. As a signatory to the Five Power Defence Arrangements, Britain believed that any military friction in the South China Sea might implicate its own security interests. Consequently, it refrained from supporting any party's territorial claims, yet frequently declared that it was "justified in urging all claimant states to settle their differences through negotiation and to cooperate in the fair and peaceful development of resources." In assessing the regional security situation, British officials contended that China's military buildup could provoke an arms race among neighboring states and worsen regional tensions. To preserve its influence in the Asia-Pacific, Britain thus remained watchful of China's expanding presence in the South China Sea.

Keywords

South China Sea, United Kingdom, island disputes, policy

1. Introduction

After the end of the Cold War, the geopolitical landscape of the South China Sea underwent significant changes, pushing the sovereignty disputes over the islands into a new phase. During this period, China tended to favor negotiation and consultation as means of resolving the South China Sea disputes. However, countries such as Vietnam and the Philippines continued to assert their so-called "sovereignty claims" over the Spratly Islands through various means.

At this time, Britain generally maintained a relatively low-profile stance on the South China Sea issue, yet internally demonstrated a cautious attitude toward China. As a signatory to the *Five Power Defence Arrangements (FPDA)*, Britain believed that any military friction in the South China Sea could potentially involve its own interests. Consequently, while London insisted on taking no side in the sovereignty disputes over the islands, it also stated on multiple diplomatic occasions that it was "fully justified in calling upon all

claimant states in the South China Sea to resolve their differences through negotiation and to pursue the joint and peaceful development of any resources in the region."

In its internal assessments of the regional security environment, the British government considered that China's growing military capabilities could trigger an arms race among the surrounding coastal states and further destabilize the region. To sustain and project its influence in the Asia-Pacific, Britain deemed it necessary to remain vigilant toward China's expanding presence in the South China Sea.

The existing research on Britain's South China Sea policy has paid little attention to the early 1990s. This study, however, makes use of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office archives to conduct a detailed examination of the United Kingdom's position on the South China Sea disputes during that period.

2. The Fundamental Principles of Britain's South China Sea Policy

In the early 1990s, tensions in the South China Sea began to rise. The United Kingdom continued to gather relevant information through its diplomatic missions in East and Southeast Asia so that the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) could formulate appropriate countermeasures. From 15 to 18 July 1991, the Second "Workshop on the South China Sea Issues" was held in Bandung, Indonesia. Peter Collecott, Counsellor at the British Embassy in Jakarta, reported the event to David Colvin, Head of the FCO's Southeast Asia Department. In his reply, Colvin noted that Britain's main interests in the region consisted of three elements: navigation, environmental concerns, and security issues. He urged relevant departments and overseas missions to closely monitor developments in these areas within their respective remits, so as to serve Britain's long-term policy objectives (The National Archives [TNA], 1991c).

In Colvin's view, China appeared eager to play a leading role in this strategically vital region and was unlikely to abandon its sovereignty claims. He believed that China may"be much more wary of major power involvement in future discussions in this series", and"this underlines the need for us to consider our involvement very carefully" (TNA, 1991c).

Regarding the resolution of the dispute, Colvin welcomed Indonesia's initiative to foster an atmosphere in which the region's "potential conflicts" could be transformed into "potential cooperation." Nevertheless, he remained pessimistic about the prospects for a settlement, reasoning that "as soon as oil or other mineral wealth is discovered in any quantity, the quality and nature of international discussion is bound to become sharper and more politicised" (TNA, 1991c). In this sense, the issue could also generate political embarrassment for the Five Power Defence Arrangements (FPDA) (TNA, 1991c).

An analysis of Colvin's views reveals that, from the British perspective, China was regarded as the main driving force behind the escalation of the South China Sea conflict; that multilateral cooperation was seen as the proper means of resolving the dispute; and that the overall outlook for peace was far from optimistic. In this way, Britain's South China Sea policy in the 1990s began to take shape: it sought to bring Asia-Pacific states to the forefront and to use multilateral diplomacy as a framework for balancing China's growing regional influence. Unlike the more assertive stance adopted by London in the South China Sea during the 2010s, the United Kingdom at the end of the Cold War remained largely behind the scenes, avoiding direct confrontation with China. Nevertheless, the perception of China as a potential strategic rival in the region had already begun to form.

Among the three areas of British concern identified by Colvin, regional security was undoubtedly paramount. Given the limited military and economic capabilities of Southeast Asian states, none posed a major challenge to British interests in the South China Sea. Consequently, Britain's attention naturally focused on China. British officials fully recognized that China would not back down in defending its sovereignty claims over the South China Sea islands. As early as 14 September 1991, China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs reaffirmed its "indisputable sovereignty" over the Spratly Islands in response to Malaysia's plan to build a simple airstrip on Swallow Reef (People's Daily, 1991).

Sir Robin McLaren, the British Ambassador to China at the time, did not interpret this as an indication that Beijing would take aggressive action. As he understood it, "China hopes not to have to solve the Spratley dispute until after it has sorted out its land borders, at a time when China is wooing ASEAN and it is set to normalise relations with Vietnam, it is unlikely to want to do more than put down such a marker" (TNA,

1991b). Yet the ambassador also cautioned that China was modernizing its navy and air force, thereby expanding its power projection capabilities to cover the Spratly Islands, and that "China would undoubtedly take a very dim view of anything which it saw as seriously threatening its own claims" (TNA, 1991b). This demonstrates that British officials in Beijing were well aware of China's firm stance on safeguarding its territorial claims.

It is evident, therefore, that even diplomatic statements alone could attract the close attention of British officials. Whenever China took substantive action on its South China Sea sovereignty claims, the FCO launched in-depth intelligence-gathering and analytical efforts to assess regional developments. In the first half of 1992, China's actions in asserting its rights through legal instruments and resource development drew intense international scrutiny—providing a timely opportunity for Britain to conduct a systematic review of its own South China Sea policy.

3. Britain's Concern over the Impact of China's Sovereignty-Protection Actions in the South China Sea

After the Cold War, in response to the changing regional situation, the Chinese government further sought to safeguard its legitimate rights and interests in the South China Sea through multiple channels, giving its policy a more systematic and institutionalized character. In February 1992, the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress adopted the Law of the People's Republic of China on the Territorial Sea and the Contiguous Zone. The law explicitly stipulated that China's territorial sea comprises "the belt of sea adjacent to its land territory and internal waters," and that the Dongsha, Xisha, Zhongsha, and Nansha Islands all form part of Chinese territory. It defined the breadth of China's territorial sea as twelve nautical miles from the baselines, and the contiguous zone as twelve nautical miles beyond the territorial sea. The law authorized the Chinese government to "exercise control within its contiguous zone to prevent and punish acts violating its laws and regulations concerning security, customs, fiscal, sanitary, or immigration matters within its land territory, internal waters, or territorial sea" (People's Daily, 1992b).

China's acceleration of its efforts to assert sovereignty in the South China Sea attracted close attention from Britain. Following the promulgation of the Territorial Sea Law, officials at the British Embassy in Beijing promptly translated the document's full text. Ambassador Robin McLaren admitted that he was, for the time being, uncertain about China's specific motivation for enacting the law at that moment. However, some of his colleagues had heard that Beijing intended to place its claims on record before the upcoming International Conference on the Law of the Sea the following year (TNA, 1992h). Compared with McLaren's relatively cautious interpretation, some British diplomats stationed in other Southeast Asian countries adopted a more negative view of China's move.

The British High Commissioner in Malaysia, in particular, focused on the Malaysian government's reaction. Given the existence of a defense cooperation treaty between the United Kingdom and Malaysia, any escalation of conflict could theoretically draw Britain into the dispute. China's legal move to reinforce its sovereignty claims triggered significant concern in Malaysia. According to a British communication dated March 1992, Malaysian media cited Foreign Minister Abdullah Badawi as saying that Kuala Lumpur was uneasy about China's promulgation of the Territorial Sea Law, viewing it as an obstacle to the peaceful settlement of the islands dispute. Malaysian Minister of Justice Syed Hamid Albar likewise remarked that Malaysia did not need to pass a similar law to assert sovereignty over the disputed islands, but "could prove its territorial rights over them through quote historical facts and a concrete legal process" (TNA, 1992g).

Following China's promulgation of the *Territorial Sea Law* in early 1992, Bruce E. Cleghorn, the British Deputy High Commissioner in Malaysia, attributed the worsening regional situation to Beijing, stating that "any sign of a newly aggressive stance on the issue by Peking - for whatever reasons - will only serve to concentrate minds further on possible preventative measures" (TNA, 1992g). In his view, Malaysia was at that time attempting to ease the pressures arising from its border disputes with neighboring countries, while China's actions had dealt a considerable shock to the region. Cleghorn also acknowledged that Malaysia consistently regarded its dispute with China over the Spratly Islands as a major factor in its military threat assessments (TNA, 1992g).

It can thus be seen that, according to the understanding of British diplomats in Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur would continue to uphold its sovereignty claims over the Spratly Islands and reefs. While remaining alert to China's potential military threat, Malaysia did not wish to become directly involved in an armed confrontation with any party over the issue. Rather, its public statements were aimed at strengthening its own voice in South China Sea affairs so as to gain leverage in future multilateral cooperation within Southeast Asia. At the same time, British officials clearly portrayed China as the principal culprit behind the escalation of regional tensions.

4. Britain's Concern over China's Issuance of Oil Exploration Contracts in the Spratly Islands

After the promulgation of the *Law of the People's Republic of China on the Territorial Sea and the Contiguous Zone*, China accelerated its efforts to develop oil and gas resources in the South China Sea. On 8 May 1992, the China National Offshore Oil Corporation (CNOOC) signed a petroleum contract with the U.S. Crestone Energy Corporation for the Wan'an Bei-21 block in the western waters of the Spratly Islands. Under the agreement, Crestone was responsible for conducting seismic surveys and drilling operations in the area (People's Daily, 1992a). This was the first contract signed between the Chinese government and a foreign oil company for resource development in the Spratly region, carrying significant political implications.

China's lawful resource development once again aroused dissatisfaction among neighboring states, and British diplomatic missions abroad closely followed the matter. Vietnam considered the oil exploration agreement between China and the U.S. company to be a grave infringement upon its national interests. According to information received by the British Embassy in Hanoi, the Vietnamese Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a strongly worded statement declaring that "no foreign countries or companies are allowed to operate therein. An immediate cessation of any illegal exploration or exploitation activity in the area is demanded" (TNA, 1992c).

In response, Peter Williams, the British Ambassador to Vietnam, observed that the Sino-Vietnamese dispute over the South China Sea islands was complicating the process of normalizing relations between the two countries. Williams noted that " it was however to be hoped that the process of normalisation of relations between Peking and Hanoi would have at least averted open disputes", yet "the present problem is regarded as serious here and is said to have resulted in the early cutting short of a visit to Peking by Nguyen van Linh, the former secretary" (TNA, 1992c). In the view of British diplomats, the clash between China and Vietnam over the Spratly Islands introduced significant tension into the normalization process of Sino-Vietnamese relations, casting a shadow over the prospects for stability in the wider region.

In response to Ambassador Williams's portrayal of heightened tensions in Sino-Vietnamese relations, Hoare, an Asia specialist at the FCO Research Department, expressed disagreement. Hoare argued that Vietnam's statement amounted to nothing more than a "standard reservation of position." He pointed out that China had adopted the same approach when conflicts arose in both the East and South China Seas. For example, in January 1992, when Vietnam and Malaysia agreed to conduct joint exploration of islands located on their *mutual continental shelf*, China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs likewise reaffirmed its "indisputable sovereignty" (TNA, 1992d). Thus, in Hoare's view, the tone of Williams's telegram was unnecessarily alarmist.

Williams had also hinted in his dispatch that senior Vietnamese officials were deeply concerned about a Chinese publication on territorial boundaries. On this point, Hoare offered a correction: "(The book) would not necessarily represent the formal position of the Chinese government on the question of frontiers. The days when all books published in China could be seen as significant guides to an orthodox line have passed and, as elsewhere, many books represent nothing more than the author's views" (TNA, 1992d).

Compared with his colleague stationed in Hanoi, Hoare's assessment was clearly more measured and realistic. He did not believe that the views expressed in a single book would have any significant impact on Sino-Vietnamese bilateral relations.

According to intelligence gathered by the British Embassy in Hanoi, during the dispute arising from the *Wan'an Bei-21* oil block, Vietnam sought to engage the United States diplomatically to prevent Crestone Energy Corporation from continuing its contract with the Chinese side. In its communications with Washington, the Vietnamese government expressed that "they were clearly upset that the Chinese had granted the oil concession, and suspected US government involvement" (TNA, 1992l).

The U.S. government responded that "there was no US government contact with Crestone before the deal was reached. The Americans did not want to take sides over the Spratley islands dispute, and hoped the parties would reach a peaceful settlement acceptable to all" (TNA, 1992l). While attempting to maintain a neutral stance, the U.S. agreed to convey Vietnam's concerns to Crestone and, at Hanoi's request, to encourage the company to contact the Vietnamese authorities directly (TNA, 1992l). Following these exchanges, Washington also informed the British Ambassador to the United States, Robin Renwick, of the developments.

According to information received by the British side, on 18 June 1992, the U.S. State Department spokesperson was asked at a press briefing about Crestone's oil contract with China. The spokesperson stated that the U.S. government took no position on the matter, reiterating that territorial disputes should be resolved peacefully and that the principle of freedom of navigation must be upheld (TNA, 1992m). When a reporter noted that Crestone had claimed China would use its naval forces to protect the company's interests and asked for the U.S. government's reaction, the spokesperson replied only that the United States "strongly opposed the use of force to resolve territorial disputes in the South China Sea" (TNA, 1992m).

It was thus clear that the United States signaled its intention to remain neutral in the Sino-Vietnamese dispute over the *Wan'an Bei-21* contract, implying that Washington would not take action to protect Crestone's commercial interests. As a result, Vietnam realized that it would not face U.S. pressure should it seek to obstruct the company's exploration activities. The U.S. position also suggested that if American companies entered into similar resource-extraction contracts with China, their interests might not be defended by their home government. Given that the identified oil-bearing areas, such as the Wan'an Basin, were located close to Vietnam's coastline—where China's maritime capabilities remained relatively limited—companies entering into agreements with Beijing would face considerable operational risk. This, in turn, was likely to encourage more foreign firms to sign exploration and development contracts with Vietnam, thereby exacerbating Hanoi's illegal exploitation of South China Sea resources. Subsequently, Vietnam signed additional agreements with U.S. firms such as Oceanic Petroleum and Mobil Oil for large-scale extraction of valuable oil and gas resources in the Spratly region (Wu, 2013). The British government was undoubtedly aware of Washington's position on the issue, which provided useful insight for shaping its own approach.

In fact, when BP (British Petroleum) participated in oil exploration bidding near the Gulf of Tonkin, it wrote to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) seeking clarification on the respective claims of China and Vietnam in the area. In response, Hoare, an East Asia specialist at the FCO, replied that the British side did not yet have clear knowledge of either country's precise claims, and that no agreement had been reached between them regarding those waters. He also noted that China's recently issued declaration on its territorial sea and contiguous zone might conflict with Vietnam's assertions (TNA, 1992e).

Given the limited information available, Hoare advised the FCO to respond cautiously to BP's inquiry. The subsequent reply fully adopted Hoare's recommendations, warning the company of the potential for conflict between China and Vietnam in adjacent waters. The letter made clear the British government's position: "the British Government has taken no position on the possible claims to territorial seas or contiguous zones in this area, and we would not want to support one side or another" (TNA, 1992j).

This shows that while the British government permitted domestic firms to participate in oil and gas development in disputed South China Sea areas, it urged them to carefully assess the risks involved. London was unwilling to become directly entangled in the Sino-Vietnamese maritime boundary dispute. The FCO also emphasized that its correspondence "is not and should not be construed or quoted as an expression of Government policy" (TNA, 1992j). This caveat implied that in the event of a crisis, the British government was unlikely to take measures to protect corporate interests. Nonetheless, BP went on to sign oil development contracts with Vietnam in the disputed maritime zones (Hindley & Bridge, 1994).

In summary, during the first half of 1992, China's promulgation of the *Law of the People's Republic of China on the Territorial Sea and the Contiguous Zone*, along with its move to offer oil and gas exploration contracts to foreign companies, drew close attention from British diplomatic officials. Relevant British embassies actively maintained communication with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) to transmit internal intelligence and convey their own assessments of the situation. From these reports, it is evident that the parties involved in the island disputes expressed strong dissatisfaction with China's assertive actions to safeguard its claims, yet were reluctant to allow the situation to escalate into open conflict. Some British diplomats abroad explicitly indicated that China's actions could have a destabilizing effect on regional security;

however, officials in London believed the issue required careful study and that Britain should refrain from becoming entangled in the dispute.

As the Spratly Islands issue once again became a focal point, Westminster's professional bureaucrats began planning how to safeguard Britain's core interests in the area. Communications from overseas missions were often infused with hostility toward China, while in related discussions, the media and certain academic circles frequently emphasized China's potential expansionist ambitions. In contrast, some FCO East Asia specialists argued that China's threat should not be overemphasized to avoid excessively pessimistic predictions regarding the South China Sea situation. The tension between these two perspectives provides a key lens for understanding Britain's early post–Cold War policy toward the South China Sea.

5. The FCO Research Department's Optimistic Assessment of the South China Sea Situation

In May 1992, the FCO Southeast Asia Department judged it necessary to prepare a study on the issue to plan for possible future policy actions. To this end, it requested the FCO Research Department to draft a report on the Spratly Islands dispute for reference. This report was expected to cover key elements such as the historical background of the dispute, the territorial claims and legal standing of each claimant, the islands' strategic and economic significance, and the parties' policies and development plans (TNA, 1992k).

In response, East Asia specialist Hoare noted that the Research Department had already issued relevant memoranda analyzing the Spratly issue in the late 1980s. "There have been various subsequent statements/actions by some of the countries with claims but no fundamental change of position or occupation. Neither is any such change likely for some considerable time, for a number of reasons" (TNA, 1992f). Consequently, the report submitted to the Southeast Asia Department was relatively concise.

Hoare's reference to late-1980s memoranda likely stems from a draft prepared by Susan Morton of the FCO Far East Department in September 1988. Morton's memorandum provided a detailed record of historical and contemporary events relating to the territorial claims of various countries but did not assess the legal validity of these claims (TNA, 1988a). Morton observed that "it is difficult to sort out precise historical detail of the various conflicting claims, and impossible to trace initial discovery of the islands" (TNA, 1988a). She also noted that Chinese sources provided impressive documentary and archaeological evidence, citing materials from China's January 1980 White Paper, including Wan Zhen's *Nanzhou Yiwuzhi* and Kang Tai's *Funan Zhuan*, to demonstrate China's historical connection to the Spratlys (TNA, 1988a). In Morton's view, "the only people who appear to have lived on the islands are Chinese fishermen from Hainan Island" (TNA, 1988a), but she believed that their presence did not constitute actual control of the island by the Chinese government. Thus, Morton did not recognize China's historical rights in the area. Nevertheless, when viewed through the lens of temporal principles in twentieth-century international law, her judgment was also somewhat biased. Regarding the claims of Southeast Asian states, the memorandum largely focused on post-1950s events, offering limited explanatory value for the origins of the dispute. Therefore, based solely on this memorandum, FCO officials could not fully understand the Spratly issue, making a cautious approach to public statements understandable.

Morton's memorandum also included assessments of the contemporary situation. She argued that the Spratly dispute had broad geopolitical significance, implicating superpower competition and shifts in the regional balance of power in Asia. China sought to demonstrate its regional influence, which could potentially spark new conflicts (TNA, 1988b). This view, however, was contested within the British government. Ministry of Defence official John Topp argued against overstating the dispute's importance, noting that even if China seized islands, it would not alter the regional balance of power, and that China was currently inclined to adopt a patient, wait-and-see strategy (TNA, 1988b).

Hoare's discussion was built on the foundation of this memorandum. He concluded that the Spratly situation was unlikely to undergo fundamental change for a considerable period, since" none of those concerned is strong enough to be able to enforce its claims over vast areas of sea dotted with reefs and islets barely above water" (TNA, 1992f). He added, "That may change, of course, but for the immediate future (five years?), it will be the mixture as before - considerable posturing, occasional clashes, and some attempts to diffuse the arising tension" (TNA, 1992f).

Hoare's assessment of the dispute's longevity finds support in a 1989 FCO Research Department report on the South China Sea's exclusive economic zones (EEZs). The report noted that provisions in the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea regarding territorial seas, continental shelves, and EEZs facilitated coastal states' expansion of rights, thereby complicating the South China Sea disputes (TNA, 1991a) hood of conflict, as they established a separate framework for defining baselines, continental shelves, and EEZs, potentially generating disputes between the Philippines and Indonesia in Subic Bay, and between Indonesia and Malaysia in the South China Sea (TNA, 1991a). This legal analysis led Britain to recognize that Spratly sovereignty disputes and maritime boundary issues were intractable and would exert lasting effects on bilateral relations in the region. As long as disputes persisted, Southeast Asian states would seek political and military cooperation with extra-regional powers to bolster their advantage, creating opportunities for Britain to benefit indirectly.

Hoare also argued that previous memoranda overstated China's aggressiveness in the dispute. On the contrary, he noted that China was willing to cooperate with Southeast Asian countries on certain issues, did not intend to escalate tensions, but would not compromise on core interests (TNA, 1992f). Supporting evidence included statements from Premier Li Peng during his August 1990 Southeast Asia tour, indicating China's willingness to jointly develop South China Sea resources while shelving sovereignty issues. In June 1991, President Yang Shangkun visited Indonesia, with both he and Foreign Minister Qian Qichen reaffirming China's sovereignty claims while emphasizing that disputes should be resolved peacefully and noting the potential for cooperative ventures. Similarly, during the second South China Sea workshop in Indonesia in July 1991, Chinese representatives reiterated sovereignty positions while expressing support for joint development. Following the workshop, a Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson noted that the meeting strengthened the spirit of cooperative development of the islands (TNA, 1992f).

These interactions in the early 1990s demonstrated China's clear stance on sovereignty, its adherence to a "shelve disputes, pursue joint development" approach, and its desire to enhance cooperation with relevant countries across multiple issues—leaving British analysts with the impression that China aimed to strengthen multilateral collaboration, peacefully resolve disputes, and maintain regional stability.

Regarding other claimants, Hoare primarily focused on their actions in the South China Sea. The Malaysian military repeatedly asserted its intent to defend its territorial claims, reportedly developing disputed islands as tourist sites and constructing dual-use runways in 1991. In February 1992, the Philippines reinforced the garrison of an occupied island, including building garages for tanks, and in March 1992, detained seven Chinese fishermen in the Spratlys. Vietnam reiterated its sovereignty claims following China's territorial sea law and the signing of oil and gas agreements with U.S. companies (TNA, 1992f).

Britain noted that, after the Cold War, some Southeast Asian states accelerated their efforts to assert control over the Spratlys, not only issuing multiple sovereignty statements but also establishing military facilities on occupied reefs and islands to consolidate de facto control. Hoare also mentioned Indonesia as a "neutral" actor, highlighting its convening of two South China Sea workshops where participants agreed to explore cooperation in multiple areas without undermining territorial claims and to resolve disputes through negotiation. Indonesia did not criticize China's territorial sea law (TNA, 1992f).

Overall, the Research Department's reports indicated a view that the current Spratly disputes were not fundamentally different from previous disputes. Claimants sought to assert their positions on the international stage while enhancing administrative and economic control over islands to achieve "effective control." Simultaneously, none wished to trigger military confrontation, leading to the establishment of dialogue platforms to facilitate information exchange. Recognizing that no single party could dominate the Spratly Islands, Britain concluded that the disputes were likely to be long-lasting. Consequently, there was no need for the UK to overreact to regional stability concerns. Nevertheless, Hoare's perspective was not overwhelmingly dominant within the FCO, as a more pessimistic viewpoint also persisted.

As Vietnam continued to lodge protests against China, international attention on the South China Sea situation intensified. British newspapers seized the opportunity to highlight the possibility of a military conflict in the region. For example, *The Daily Telegraph* noted in a report on July 7: "Oil wealth found beneath the South China Sea is fueling an explosive arms race in South-East Asia. Every nation surrounding the waters between Japan and the Strait of Malacca has either announced or begun a major weapons build-up" (TNA, 1992t). The editorial listed recent military developments among countries surrounding the South China Sea

and argued that the likelihood of regional conflict was rising. It characterized China's oil contract with Crestone as "a deft piece of bullying by Peking" (TNA, 1992t), implying that China was the principal driver of potential escalation. At the time, FCO Minister of State Alastair Goodlad wrote to Gavin Hewitt, Director of the Southeast Asia Department, requesting an assessment of the likelihood of conflict in the South China Sea (TNA, 1992n).

Against this backdrop, the Southeast Asia Department held in-depth discussions on the developments in the South China Sea, providing East Asia researchers in the FCO an opportunity to voice their analysis. On the likelihood of escalating regional conflict, R.F. Wye of the Research Department observed that the discovery of oil might increase the frequency of disputes among claimants and raise regional tensions (TNA, 1992r). However, Wye also noted that the parties had no desire for the dispute to spin out of control. Overly aggressive actions would be counterproductive. He argued that much of the claimants' display of determination to defend their rights was posturing; they were more likely to "seek to exploit minor opportunities to further their claims" (TNA, 1992r).

Based on this reasoning, Wye concluded that China and Vietnam were unlikely to pursue large-scale military conflict, and that a stalemate was the most probable outcome. He suggested that Vietnam might attempt to expel Chinese personnel from Nanxun Reef or remove Chinese sovereignty markers, but if such actions occurred, China would use force if necessary to prevent them. While there was some risk of accidental clashes, neither side could escalate the conflict substantially (TNA, 1992r). Wye based this assessment on two points: first, the 1988 armed clash between China and Vietnam in the Spratlys had heightened regional tensions but did not escalate further; future minor conflicts would likely produce similar outcomes. Second, neither China, Vietnam, nor other claimants had the capacity to unilaterally enforce their sovereignty claims (TNA, 1992r).

Regarding China's South China Sea policy, Wye elaborated that, despite concerns over China's assertiveness, it was unrealistic for China to fully control the Spratlys. He acknowledged that China's actions in the area were more public and proactive than in the past because Beijing perceived the situation to be favorable. After the Soviet Union's collapse, China no longer feared that confrontation with Vietnam would escalate into a broader Soviet conflict, though previous Soviet threats had not significantly constrained Chinese activity in the Spratlys. While recognizing China's advantageous position, Wye also noted that expelling Vietnamese garrisons was difficult; monitoring the entire archipelago remained a challenging task despite recent enhancements in Chinese air and naval capabilities. At the same time, other claimants were also strengthening their overall military capacities (TNA, 1992r).

Within this context, Wye judged that China was more likely to assert its claims diplomatically. He noted that Chinese officials reiterated their indisputable sovereignty over the Spratlys during the third South China Sea forum in Indonesia, a deliberate move to emphasize their position to all claimants. Wye also stressed that China was unlikely to adopt overly aggressive measures in the island disputes: "The Chinese have in the past stated that they were in favor of a peaceful solution. They will presumably stick to this line" (TNA, 1992r).

Sharing a similar perspective, Hoare wrote to Gavin Hewitt, stating: "there has been periodic tension in the area of the Spratley Islands over the last 20 years. Each time there have been dire predictions of a major conflict in the area. However, I remain skeptical. None of the countries involved seems to me able to launch a major attack now or for some years to come" (TNA, 1992o). Hoare argued that, given the vastness of the South China Sea and the distance between claimants, it was difficult for any country to enforce exclusive sovereignty over the area for an extended period. As a result, the parties would continue the previous pattern of posturing (TNA, 1992o).

Hoare also cautioned Hewitt against being influenced by the frequent "China threat" rhetoric. He noted that *The Daily Telegraph* portrayed China as a villain, yet other claimants were similarly conducting oil and gas bidding or taking other actions to assert their sovereignty (TNA, 1992o). He further suggested that British policy focus should remain on the Spratly Islands, without being drawn into the Paracel Islands issue (TNA, 1992o).

6. Britain's Voice on the South China Sea Issue through the European Community Platform

As the South China Sea became a regional hotspot in the first half of 1992, the international community paid close attention to the discussions on the issue at the ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting held in Manila

in late July. For the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO), one of the main tasks in monitoring developments in the South China Sea was to prepare for the European Community–ASEAN Post-Ministerial Conference (EC/ASEAN PMC), scheduled for 24–26 July in Manila. The European Community (EC), as an influential actor on the global political stage, also expressed concern over both the ASEAN meeting and the regional situation in the South China Sea. As an important member of the EC, Britain planned to use this multilateral platform to articulate its own position on the matter.

According to a memorandum dated 14 July 1992, Britain hoped that "There is no Community position on the various claims to islands in the South China Sea. Hope that problems over conflicting claims can be resolved by peace means. Note that all the claimants, including Vietnam and the People's Republic of China, are pledged to this. Welcome the informal Jakarta "workshops" as contributing to this" (TNA, 1992s).

From these records, it is clear that Britain viewed the EC's role in Southeast Asian affairs as a "constructive" but neutral one. Accordingly, the EC had to express support for dialogue aimed at "promoting regional peace." At the same time, the focus of Britain's South China Sea policy emphasized that the dispute must not be settled by force. Notably, the draft statement explicitly mentioned both Vietnam and China, suggesting that London believed these two countries were largely responsible for the escalation of regional tensions.

After defining the general position, the memorandum's author also drafted background material to provide additional context for attending officials. In this background note, the author bluntly observed that " There has been an increase of tension in the area this year, partly by what the other claimants see as more aggressive policy by the PRC" (TNA, 1992b). Regarding the regional military buildup, the note argued that the increase in naval capabilities among neighboring states reflected general improvements in national defense rather than specific responses to developments in the South China Sea (TNA, 1992b). Thus, while Britain's public stance stressed "neutrality," internal documents reveal an underlying strategic perception that was implicitly critical of China.

This perception was not new. As early as 1989, reports produced by the FCO Research Department had described China's sovereignty claims in the South China Sea as "aggressive," reflecting a cautious attitude toward Beijing. According to the researchers, " the total expanse of China's maritime territorial claims in the South China Sea lies like a giant overlay over a jigsaw puzzle of the claims of the other contending littoral states," and that "would cut off the other littoral states, from the energy resources of the South China Sea" (TNA, 1991a). Such reasoning illustrates Britain's skepticism toward China's "shelving disputes and pursuing joint development" approach, exaggerating the scale of conflict between China and other claimants. This mindset reflected the lingering influence of Britain's early Cold War experience in Southeast Asia, where colonial-era competition with China had shaped the attitudes of FCO officials.

Returning to the 14 July document, it specifically noted that Britain had once made a weak sovereignty claim to some Spratly reefs, but that claim had been abandoned in 1974, and Britain had since refrained from making any public statement on the islands' ownership (TNA, 1992b). The memorandum also mentioned that France's claim to the Spratlys had been transferred to Vietnam. Hence, the brief report did not provide a detailed review of the historical connections between Britain, France, and the islands, leaving readers with a limited understanding of the issue. In fact, a historical examination of British and French involvement in the island disputes could have supplied important evidence in support of the legitimacy and rationality of China's sovereignty claims. Because FCO archival material from this period paid little attention to these crucial details, officials participating in policy discussions may have lacked an informed understanding of China's position—something that likely had a negative impact on British policymaking.

Nevertheless, the basic stance defined in the July memorandum was eventually reflected in the EC's official statement on the South China Sea. On 30 October 1992, during the 10th EC–ASEAN Ministerial Meeting held in Manila, the EC and ASEAN issued a joint communiqué stating: "The Community and its member states welcomed the adoption of a declaration on the south China sea at the ASEAN ministerial meeting in Manila on 22 July 1992, which urged a peaceful resolution of the claims over the Spratly Islands" (TNA, 1992i).

At the same time, Member of the European Parliament Carlos Robles Piquer raised a question within the framework of the European Political Cooperation (EPC) mechanism, inquiring about the EC's stance on the South China Sea issue and whether a common position had been reached (TNA, 1992i). The EPC Secretariat subsequently requested foreign ministries of member states to provide their input. On 27 October 1992,

Barbara Woodward of the FCO's Common Foreign and Security Policy Department wrote to relevant offices requesting the drafting of a response (TNA, 1992q). In reply, the FCO Far Eastern Department suggested that EC member states should express support for the South China Sea Declaration adopted at the ASEAN meeting, hoping "that these developments will lead to concrete talks over the future of the Spratlys" (TNA, 1992p).

Thus, Britain articulated its approach to the South China Sea through the EC platform. For London, voicing its stance jointly with European partners carried more diplomatic weight in the Asia-Pacific region than acting alone, and its active participation in EC foreign policy debates also served to reinforce its influence in regional affairs. The position statement demonstrates that Britain sought to maintain the EC's non-interventionist neutrality on the South China Sea issue, to gain the trust of regional states by supporting the principles of the *ASEAN Declaration on the South China Sea*, and to underscore Europe's constructive role in international diplomacy.

7. Conclusion

In summary, when tensions in the South China Sea escalated in 1992, Britain continued to gather information through its diplomatic missions across East and Southeast Asia to assist the FCO in formulating appropriate responses. Overall, Britain assessed that the South China Sea might continue to experience minor frictions driven by oil and gas factors, but the likelihood of a large-scale military conflict remained extremely low. For the United Kingdom, its investments in the Far East constituted vital national interests; therefore, it hoped that the parties involved in the South China Sea disputes would demonstrate a commitment to regional stability.

Similarly, the FCO was reluctant to see international opinion excessively amplify the so-called "China threat" and thereby generate unnecessary tension. Britain's stance on the South China Sea issue can be summarized in the following statement: "HMG has taken no formal position on the various territorial claims and would not wish to support one claimant or another. But we welcome a recent ASEAN Foreign Ministers' declaration urging peaceful settlement of any disputes, as well as Indonesian efforts to promote proposals for joint development of the Islands' resources" (TNA, 1992a). It should be noted, however, that although Britain consistently claimed neutrality in its public statements, its wording revealed an underlying bias. Within the British government, there was a belief that China's growing military capabilities could trigger an arms race among the countries surrounding the South China Sea, thereby worsening the regional situation. While British officials repeatedly praised the role of ASEAN states in promoting peace in the South China Sea, they seldom mentioned China's own efforts—an omission that implicitly reflected Britain's cautious vigilance toward China's expanding influence in Southeast Asia.

References

Hindley, M., & Bridge, J. (1994). South China Sea: the Spratly and Paracel Islands dispute. *World Today,* (6), 109–112.

People's Daily. (1991, September 15). Foreign Ministry Spokesman Reaffirms China's Indisputable Sovereignty over the Spratly Islands. *People's Daily,* A4.

People's Daily. (1992a, May 9). China signs its first oil exploration contract with a foreign company in the Spratly Islands. *People's Daily,* A2.

People's Daily. (1992b, February 25). Law of the People's Republic of China on the Territorial Sea and the Contiguous Zone. *People's Daily,* A4.

The National Archives. (1988a). *From J. Topp to Sue Morton, Sep.27, 1988 [FCO 21/3963]*. Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

The National Archives. (1988b). *Research Department Memorandum, The Spratly Islands, Sep., 1988 [FCO 21/3963]*. Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

The National Archives. (1991a). *Competing Claims in the Exclusive Economic Zones: An overview, 1991 [FCO 21/4804]*. Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

The National Archives. (1991b). *FM Peking to FCO 180225Z, Sep., 1991*. Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

The National Archives. (1991c). *From Colvin to Collecott, Sep.30, 1991 [FCO 21/4804]*. Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

The National Archives. (1992a). *Background, 1992 [FCO 21/6793]*. Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

The National Archives. (1992b). *Background, Islands in the South China Sea, July 14, 1992, B [FCO 21/6793]*. Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

The National Archives. (1992c). *FM Hanoi to FCO 200840Z, May, 1992, A [FCO 15/6793]*. Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

The National Archives. (1992d). *FM Hoare to Mr Burns, Auss, May, 1992, B [FCO 15/6793]*. Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

The National Archives. (1992e). *FM Hoare to Tansley, June 2, 1992 [FCO 15/6793]*. Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

The National Archives. (1992f). *FM Hore to Tansley, May 21,1992 [FCO 15/6793]*. Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

The National Archives. (1992g). *FM Kuala Lumpur to FCO 040310Z, March, 1992, B [FCO 15/6534]*. Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

The National Archives. (1992h). *FM Peking to FCO 060107Z, March, 1992, A [FCO 15/6534]*. Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

The National Archives. (1992i). *FM SEC COREU, Nov.12, 1992 [FCO 21/6793]*. Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

The National Archives. (1992j). *FM Tansley to Miss Wilson, BP Exploration, June 11, 1992 [FCO 15/6793]*. Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

The National Archives. (1992k). *FM Tansley to Mr Reddicliffe, May 15, 1992 [FCO 15/6793]*. Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

The National Archives. (1992l). *FM Washington to FCO 042320Z, June, 1992, A [FCO 15/6793]*. Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

The National Archives. (1992m). *FM Washington to FCO 192330Z, June, 1992, B [FCO 15/6793]*. Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

The National Archives. (1992n). *From Goodlad to Hewitt, July 7, 1992 [FCO 21/6793]*. Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

The National Archives. (1992o). *From Hoare to Mr Hewitt, July 13, 1992 [FCO 21/6793]*. Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

The National Archives. (1992p). *From Swift, Written European PQ on The Spratly Islands, Oct.28, 1992 [FCO 21/6793]*. Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

The National Archives. (1992q). *From Woodward, Written European PQs, October 1992, Oct.27, 1992 [FCO 21/6793]*. Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

The National Archives. (1992r). *From Wye to Mr Hewitt, July 9, 1992 [FCO 21/6793]*. Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

The National Archives. (1992s). *South China Sea Conflict/Spratley Islands, Points to Make, July 14, 1992, A [FCO 21/6793]*. Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

The National Archives. (1992t). *Superpower peace triggers an arms race among Asian nations, June 7, 1992 [FCO 21/6793]*. Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

Wu, S. (2013). *The origins and development of the Spratly Dispute* (revised ed.). China Economic Publishing House.

Funding

This research was funded by “Arrangement and Research on the Archives of the South China Sea Issue Stored in Britain”, Major Project on Philosophy and Social Sciences, National Ministry of Education, Grant Number: 20JZD035; Funding from the Special Grant for Basic Scientific Research of Central Universities in China, Grant Number: 2025300198.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Acknowledgment

This paper is an output of the science project “Arrangement and Research on the Archives of the South China Sea Issue Stored in Britain”.